



First Atlantic record of a Murphy's Petrel *Pterodroma ultima*, at St Helena

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Le premier *Pterodroma ultima* a être enregistré dans l'atlantique a été observé et photographié à Hooker's Ridge à St Helena le 31 mars 1992. Une description complète a été présenté. L'oiseau a été présent de façon intermittente, pendant au moins deux ans et a construit un nid visible. D'autres informations collectées par les insulaires locaux, nous montre d'autres événement d'oiseaux. Il n'y a pas sultérieures observations faites par les ornithologistes. L'oiseau était vaiseemblablement un migrateur, mais un certains nombres d'auteurs précédents ont spéculé que si ils n'ont pas découvert les populations des oiseaux de mer il est probable qu'ils se soient reproduit à St Helena.

Restricted, as a breeding bird, to the central Pacific Ocean, Murphy's Petrel *Pterodroma ultima* is not included in published lists of birds recorded in the Atlantic^{2,5,7-8,10-16}. Early in 1988, on St Helena Island, South Atlantic Ocean, TT was informed by the late W J (John) Bailey of the repeated occurrence of an unidentified seabird in the Hooper's Ridge area of the island. On 31 March, TT spent one hour, from 07.45 hrs, observing the bird closely, taking photographs, drawing sketches and compiling a detailed description. A full account appears in the BOU Checklist *The Birds of St Helena*¹⁵. From TT's transparencies, shown at the BOU annual conference at which the above checklist was launched (April 1998), and his account, including the rendition of the calls, the bird was formally identified by M de L Brooke and W R P Bourne as a Murphy's Petrel. Supporting details from TT's account are presented below.

Location and conditions

Hooper's Ridge is a south-west tail of St Helena's central ridge, and runs across the western end of a steep, barren valley leading east to Broad Gut, that in turn runs into Sandy Bay. The ridge and valley fall just within the peripheral arid zone. Bare rock and sandy soil support some sparse vegetation on the north side of the valley and around the three or four houses in the area.

To the west of the ridge, 200 m below, on the south side of the valley lies a small cottage, at that time belonging to Frederick & Thelma March (Plates 22 and 23 in Rowlands *et al*¹⁵), around which the bird centred its activities. Some bushes, including a dead aloe, surround the cottage which is 3 km west of

Sandy Bay at 500 m above sea-level. In flight and at rest, the bird was observed from as little as 3 m through 9 x 35 binoculars. Colour slide photographs were taken with a 500 mm mirror lens and a standard 50 mm lens camera.

Although cloud cover persisted throughout the observation period, the light was very good. There was a strong east-south-east wind (approximately Force 7), but on 18 March, when the bird was also seen, the wind was weaker (Force 4 or 5).

Behaviour

For most of the observation period, the bird flew along roughly the same circular path in an anticlockwise direction relative to a map. From the cottage it soared to the north, then west and then, flying down into the strong east-south-east wind, it would glide, calling, feet dangling, teetering from side-to-side, with the wind ruffling its wing-coverts, approaching a broken off dead aloe, 5-6 m north of the cottage. Calling with feet dangling is commonly seen in Pacific colonies of Murphy's Petrel (M de L Brooke pers comm). It hung in the wind near the tip of the aloe for a few seconds before dropping a little past it and soaring north again. On approximately half of the approaches the bird rubbed its bill against the side of the end of the aloe. The diameter of the circuit was c100 m.

Tethered near the base of the aloe, which was c3 m tall, was an intermittently noisy dog, of which the bird seemed oblivious.

The bird rested in two places. One was a shallow depression in the ground with a few blades of dry grass. According to T March this was its usual resting

place. In the strong winds of 31 March it rested more often and favoured a similar but less hollowed out patch of ground sheltered by some vegetation c30 cm high. Both areas were c20 m above and west of the cottage. When approached to within 4 m the bird walked a few paces into the wind before flying off onto its circuit. T March said she had extricated the bird from a bush near the aloe on 17 March.

Description

See Plates 33 in Rowlands *et al*⁵. The bird's size was assessed from photographs. TT's binoculars were placed where the bird had been sitting, and transparencies of the bird and the binoculars, taken from the same marked spot, were projected and compared. An approximation of the bird's wingspan was made by comparing it with the length of the bird on suitably projected transparencies. The bird was c32 cm long and its wingspan was c81 cm. It was deep-breasted and pot-bellied. The thin, medium-length wings appeared small for its body size. The wings were petrel-shaped, with parallel edges along most of their length and slightly blunt-ended. The tail was of medium length, broad and slightly rounded. The bill was black, short and thick, surmounted by a single tube divided internally by a septum. The eye was dark brown. The legs and part of the feet appeared pale grey against the sky but pink when the bird was perched. Almost all of the outer web and the distal third to half of the inner web of the feet were black.

The head, sides of face and nape were dull greyish brown, affording some contrast with the deep soft grey of the mantle, back, rump and scapulars. This grey was intermediate between dull wet slate and clean dry slate. Darker, brownish feather edges gave a wavy pattern to the mantle and back and a scalloped pattern to the scapulars and lesser-coverts. When sitting, the exposed primaries were wholly dark brownish grey. The tertials were brown-grey with a paler grey distal quarter to one-third. The median-coverts appeared as a row of darker brown feathers. The throat and chin were whitish grey merging to a pale grey area extending laterally to below the eye and onto the forehead, contrasting with the darker head. The underparts were only seen in flight and appeared uniform dull brownish grey, paler than the head and darker than the throat. In flight, the upperwing pattern was of a dark grey leading edge, paler and browner grey secondary-coverts, pale grey bases to primaries and secondaries and darker grey distal ends to flight feathers. The underwing was a dull brownish grey, slightly darker than the body. There were paler grey bases to the inner primaries, forming an indistinct pale patch.

Voice

As the bird approached the dead aloe, and while hanging in the air with its bill near or touching the aloe, it called in two ways. One or both calls were made on each approach, neither predominating. One was a series of c7 mournful *wup* notes, accelerating and rising slightly in pitch, terminating in a drawn out *woooo* descending slightly in pitch. The quality of these notes was reminiscent of but 'harder' than the hoot of a Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*. The call may be represented as *wup wup wup upupup woooo*. It lasted c2.5 sec. The other call was a slightly shorter *ki ki ki ki kweeet*, a series of four short notes followed by a more drawn out *kweeet*, that initially descended in pitch and then rose. This call was similar to that of a Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*.

For a similar description of the two calls from the Pacific, ie the Pitcairn islands of Ducie, Henderson and Oeno, see Brooke⁸.

Previous records

F & T March and their nearest neighbours, Alfred (Sammy) & Ethel Stevens, resident at Horse Ridge c400 m to the north-west, were uncertain of the details of the bird's return to Hooper's Ridge. They agreed it had been returning for periods of several months, that it had been doing so for at least two years and that it tended to appear in March, but were unsure as to whether it stayed for periods of 6–7 months without a break or disappeared for a month or two in the middle of this period. In the Pitcairn Islands, these are the same months when the species is present at its breeding colonies⁷. While in attendance, it spent most days behaving as described and would do the same on moonlit nights. It would depart for several days at a time, presumably to feed. It had not been seen to take any food on land, but pecked at some low shrubs on occasions when perched. A Stevens had been able to attract the bird by imitating its call, and had caught and photographed it on one occasion in 1987, when it settled on a water tank. A photo of the bird held by A Stevens was seen by N P & M J Ashmole, who noted that it was pale toward the end of the underwing. Also, A Stevens found it was accustomed to resting on an elevated structure of twigs, c25 cm above ground, and had assumed that this was its nest. He also remembered hearing the same calls in Wild Cattle Pound, an area 1.5 km north-west of Hooper's Ridge, c20–30 years previously.

Follow-up

On 18 May 1991, BWR visited Hooper's Ridge. The bird was not present, and both A Stevens and T March

said it had been absent for at least two years. There was no further news of the bird when BWR returned to St Helena again in January–February 1992.

On 28 January 1995, A & E Stevens were visited by N P & M J Ashmole, who gained the following additional information (from the late 1980s) concerning the bird: it ate Deadly Nightshade *Solanum nigrum* berries; colour around eye milky white; feet half-webbed; wingspan 30–34 inches; “sort of Myna bird colour” on back, not black; made ‘nest’ nearby with twigs on ground under aloe; nest 12 inches across, on top of dirt; bird glides and does not flap; very light weight, less than 1 lb; seen also 30–40 years ago (1955–1965) in ‘Suez Canal’, a little alley at Frightus, close to Asses Ears in the south.

Identification

The only *Pterodroma* petrel with similar size and plumage is Murphy’s Petrel, a species larger than the figures given for the St Helena bird, being 38–41 cm long and having a wingspan of 97 cm¹⁰. However, when S L Olson and R B Clapp examined TT’s photographs and description and compared them with skins of Murphy’s Petrel they considered the two to be indistinguishable.

Moreover, the identification by W R P Bourne and M de L Brooke as *P. ultima* is based on the fact that no other medium-sized *Pterodroma* has a similar combination of grey coloration including the underwing, paler chin and inner primaries, and pink legs with dark tips to the toes.

Conclusion

The bird was almost certainly a vagrant. On none of three motorboat trips undertaken around St Helena or landings on offshore islets and stacks did BWR see any petrels other than Madeiran Storm Petrel *Oceanodroma castro*, although he carried out a specific search. Petrels are known to be great wanderers. For example, Jouanin’s Petrel *Bulweria fallax*, a bird of the north-west Indian Ocean, has occurred among the Hawaiian Islands, near Lisianski Island⁹, and Murphy’s Petrel has been discovered to make a northward migration along the west coast of North America reaching the southern Gulf of Alaska⁵. Wandering petrels are also prone to visit seabird colonies⁴. As Murphy’s Petrel may be an ally of Mottled Petrel *P. inexpectata*, a Pacific species that feeds to the south (W R P Bourne pers comm) this may explain why it strayed into the Atlantic sector of the Southern Ocean. However, lying only 5–6 km from Hooper’s Ridge, the Speery Island group (which includes Upper and Lower Black Rocks, the Needle and Salt Rock,

hitherto not visited by ornithologists), may provide a suitable nesting site, as *Pterodroma ultima*, like Trinidad Petrel *P. arminjoniana* of Ilha da Trindade and Martin Vas, and Round Island, off Mauritius, is not a burrow-nester; there is no suitable substrate on St Helena’s outliers for burrows¹⁵. Ashmole¹, Bourne³ and Bourne & Loveridge⁶ have postulated that a relic population of petrels and shearwaters may be resident and breed undetected on St Helena’s steep inaccessible mainland cliffs and offshore islets. Whether a vagrant or a possible breeder, the occurrence of *P. ultima* at St Helena, far beyond its normally recorded range in the Pacific, highlights not only the importance of observations of petrels, but also the need for regular observations of the less accessible parts of oceanic islands.

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